

## We are both diplomats and traders: Afghan transregional traders across the former Soviet Union

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**‘We Are Both Diplomats and Traders’: Afghan Transregional Traders Across the Former Soviet Union (9065 words)**

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**Abstract:**

Building on fieldwork with Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union, this article uses the idea of diplomacy to explore the skills and capacities that are central to the traders' self-understandings and working lives. Of central concern is the way in which the traders often identify themselves as being 'diplomats'. The expressions of the traders' diplomatic skills take various forms including an ability to speak multiple languages, form intimate personal relationships across the boundaries of religion and ethnicity, and the capacity to lead mobile lives, something itself informed by an intense degree of multi-local familiarity. Being diplomatic also takes a material form in the traders' lives, especially in their choices of clothing and in the design of their offices. In exploring these different markers of being diplomatic in

the context of the activities of a long-distance trade network, it is suggested that anthropology needs to attend not only to the possibilities of using diplomacy as an analytical device, but also as an emic category that invests the lives of particular communities with meaning and significance.

## **Introduction**

In the heady atmosphere of Kiev's Maidan protests of 2013/14, one individual to successfully forge a political career was Mustafa Nayyem, an Afghan-born journalist who had first achieved notoriety across Ukraine in 2009 having conducted a probing interview of former President Viktor Yanukovich. Nayyem moved to Ukraine from Kabul in 1992 after the collapse of the pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan. His father had studied at university in Moscow and later worked in Kiev's Academy of Sciences, before starting, alongside approximately another 4000 Ukraine-based Afghans, to make a living by importing Chinese goods, and selling these in markets in Kiev and Odessa. Having initially helped his father in his business activities, Mustafa decided to pursue a career in journalism, eventually running a TV station. He then became an activist, and was elected as a member of Ukraine's parliament in 2014. Nayyem's shift in status from Afghan refugee to Ukrainian parliamentarian indicates the need for sophisticated insight into the role played by transnational movements of people in the political cultures of the former Soviet Union. Is Nayyem's success simply the story of a talented migrant? Alternatively, does it reflect the highly developed diplomatic capacities of actors from countries such as Afghanistan that are located in frontier realms that straddle culture areas, nation-states, and historically shifting imperial formations?

This article argues that the case of Mustafa Nayyem reflects the forms of diplomatic capacity and skill that are important to the daily lives of these mobile traders from Afghanistan. It suggests that the notion of 'everyday diplomacy' is helpful as a device for analyzing the traders thought and activities because the traders identify themselves as being diplomats and demonstrate a clear preference for their being thought of by others in such terms. Additionally, the notion of diplomacy speaks to the morally ambiguous aspects of being a trader more clearly

than that the notion of cosmopolitanism – a term that emphasizes the possibility of inherent human openness and respect for difference (see the Introduction to this Special Issue).

Afghans have not only established themselves as skillful and successful traders in Ukraine, they are a visible feature of commercial life across a range of settings across the former Soviet Union, especially in the Muslim majority Central Asian Republics, and the Russian Federation (Marsden 2015a; 2015b; 2016). The traders themselves often emphasise, moreover, that the capacity of being diplomatic is an important aspect both of the modes in which they make a living, and of their collective self-understandings. In April 2014 for example, I spent an evening with Attaullah, an Afghan trader in his early 50s, his Turkish wife, and their two teenage daughters in the port city of Odessa on Ukraine's Black Sea coast. Having dined on fine Armenian shahshlyk (kebab) and partaken in a bottle of 10 year old cognac, Attaullah and I strolled around a newly built shopping centre that housed shops selling high-priced luxury goods such as leather bags and shoes, watches and jewelry. These goods were of a similar quality to those that he and other Afghans imported to Odessa from China and then sold on wholesale in the city's famed 7km container market (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009; Polese and Prigarin 2013). According to Attaullah, however, in the shopping centre the goods were just marketed and packaged differently. Regardless, Attaullah said that he and his family enjoyed visiting the mall and shopping there from time-to-time. Abruptly, one of Attaullah's daughters grabbed her father's hand and pulled him away leaving me to wait outside a shop. A few minutes later Attaullah returned with a shopping bag that contained a new and elegant jacket. He then exclaimed: 'My daughters complain that the Turkish-made coat I am wearing now is old and out of fashion and they forced me to buy a new one. They know that while I am a trader, I also do other things – such as speaking at Afghan gatherings and other events – you see Mr. Magnus, we are traders and diplomats, simultaneously (*ma ham tojir hastim, ham*

*diplomat hastim*). This vignette illustrates the ways in which the traders, as well as their family and friends, think about and valorize their capacities and skills, as well more generally of the lives they lead, in terms of a discourse of ‘being diplomatic’. Yet if the traders fashion a collective diplomatic identity, the relationship of this identity to sovereign territory is more ambiguous than is usually the case for the official representatives of governments and nation-states. Ethnography illuminates therefore the significance of non-elite actors to the field of diplomacy and also brings attention to the ways in which notions of diplomacy are articulated in particular communities.

The article points more broadly to the insights that scholarship on mobile and trans-regional trading networks offers into the field of diplomacy. It does so by locating the activities of individuals such as Nanyem in relationship to scholarship on trading networks and the significant role that these have played historically in the conduct of diplomacy. Historians have underscored the importance of various forms of exchange to the ways in which empires, states, and societies came to know about and deal with difference. Stephen Kotkin places exchange at the heart of his definition of empire, arguing in the context of the Mongol Empire that exchange was not a ‘bi-product of interaction’ or an ‘occasional phenomenon’, but ‘the *raison d’être* of their empire: empire as exchange—essentially without barriers of religion, tribe, or language, thanks in large measure to *Realpolitik* (the inverse scale of the conquerors to their conquests)’ (Kotkin 2007: 504).<sup>1</sup> Much recent historical anthropology on trans-imperial and trans-local networks of trading and religious personnel has emphasised the importance of diplomatic knowledge and practice to the complex political roles that such groups have played across space and time (e.g. Alsanian 2014; Dale 1994; Ho 2003, 2006; Levi-Strauss 1969: 77;

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<sup>1</sup> See C. Bayly (2003) for a discussion of the ways in which historic forms of global interconnectedness were subordinated and redirected by an emerging modern system shaped by international capitalism, the nation state, and consumption.

Markovits 2000; Sahlins 1974: 392; Subrahmanyam 1992). Reflecting on such work, scholars of diplomacy have called for greater recognition of the ‘hidden continuities’ between ‘professional diplomatic intercourse’ and ‘everyday life’, arguing that there is an urgent need to recover the ‘old meaning of diplomacy as a way of knowing and dealing with otherness’ (Cornago 2013: 1). This stands in contrast to the modern concept of ‘the diplomat’ as a professionalised and permanent type of personnel: prior to the development of the modern nation-state, envoys were recruited for a specific diplomatic mission from trading communities and networks, according to their skills in the delicate art of trade; when their work was done, they returned to their original duties (Istanbuli 2001; cf. Cornago 2013). Considerable scope exists for inter-disciplinary research involving anthropologists and global historians to shed light on the ways in which diplomatic practices, skills, knowledge, and models of action come to be embedded historically in particular communities, networks, and polities.

### **Frontier Realms and Partial Groupings**

Two bodies of scholarship have been especially helpful in my analysis of the diplomatic capacities of Afghan traders: one concerns the study of ‘global frontier realms’, the other that of ‘partial groupings’. ‘Global frontier realms’ (Christelow 2012) are zones of friction in that they are peripheral but not marginal to multiple polities and cultures. Those who inhabit such spaces (e.g. the Sahara, the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier, Burma) have been shown in both older and more recent studies to be sophisticated boundary crossers endowed with the capacity to forge connections between politically and culturally divided spaces (e.g. Leach 1970; Marsden and Hopkins 2012; van Schendell 2002;). As Seema Alavi’s discussion of the diplomatic activities of mobile and cosmopolitan Muslim scholars who were active across the boundaries of the Ottoman, Russian and British empires demonstrates, frontier realms are

unique contexts in which to document and explore forms of diplomacy that are not connected to the nation-state (Alavi 2014).

The importance of diplomatic skills and capacities to the conduct of everyday life in such frontier realms illustrates the problems of assuming that the nation-state is always primarily at stake in matters of diplomacy. This Afghan traders who focused on in this article underscore the importance of diplomatic practices, skills, and capacities to the activities of the long-distant trading networks that cut-across the boundaries of the nation-state. Following Enseng Ho, it is helpful to think of these dispersed Afghan traders as forming a ‘partial grouping’ (Ho 2013, 2014). Ho uses the concept of ‘partial grouping’ to refer to a group which is geographically dispersed, connected to counterpart communities across long distances, and formed in relationship to ongoing circulations and exchanges over time.<sup>2</sup> Ho’s notion of partial grouping is helpful in analyzing the capacity of Afghans to both work and live in a variety of trading nodes across Russia and Ukraine because of the emphasis that it places on the maintenance of connections across locales. At the same time, (see also the contributions of Henig and Ka-Kin Cheuk to this volume) ‘partial groupings’ offer a privileged site for the ethnographic exploration of the field of diplomacy, and the hidden diplomatic histories and practices that it is informed by. Studies of this type of grouping offer the potential of assessing how far conventional and predominantly Westphalian images of diplomacy are helpful for understanding the activities of mobile traders.

### **Afghan Trade and Traders**

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<sup>2</sup> Ho’s concept of ‘partial grouping’ is comparable to the notion of ‘circulation societies’, that are defined in terms of their sustained mobility and capacity to forge connections between disparate contexts (e.g. Aslanian 2014; Falzon 2004; Henig 2014; Markovits 2000; Markovits et al. 2006; Trivellato 2011). An important distinction lies in Ho’s recognition of the need to recognition the partiality of such groupings, rather than positing them as society-like ‘wholes’.



Historians and anthropologists have recently begun to question the widely held notion that Afghanistan's 'traditional economy' was 'peasant-based' and isolated from global economic dynamics. Both Benjamin Hopkins (2009) and Shah Mahmoud Hanifi (2011) argue that the oft-made distinction between Afghanistan's 'peasant' and latter-day 'war' economy conceal a far more complex historical reality: Afghanistan was important to the political economies of both colonial South Asia and Central Asia, as well as Russia itself, and Afghans were connected to these worlds as both producers and traders. Trade, moreover, was not only an important aspect of people's working lives: it helped to shape the region's social and political structures, as well as people's modes of criticising these. On the one hand, 'trading tribes' were centrally involved in the taxation and surveillance of trade by the Afghan state, the organisation of trade caravans (*kafilah*), and the security of these along the routes which they travelled; all this meant that traders were critical to the making of Afghanistan's territorial boundaries and state structures. On the other hand, traders, merchants, and networks of shopkeepers were critical to the development of strategies deployed by Afghans and others in the region to contest, subvert, criticise, and navigate such state structures and practices, as well as the forms of inequality they produced. Trade fairs and markets, especially those organised in relation to the sale of fruit and of horses, for example, were a dynamic and translocal context that allowed people to gather and states to interact yet were also used by organic intellectuals to challenge unfair trade monopolies (Caron 2011; Gommans 2002; Hopkins 2008). This history of participation within trade networks, as well as travel for religious education and pilgrimage, had major ramifications for the social and economic dynamics of the country and the experiences of mobile Afghans abroad. Afghans migrated to the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf, linking their inland tract to the Indian Ocean regional economy (Nichols 2007). Moreover, their prior integration into trading networks and the resulting degree of commercial acumen that they possessed ensured that Afghans not only entered into the global worlds of the

colonial labour market - they also established themselves as traders and merchants in many of the places to which they travelled (Crews 2015).

Afghan actors have also demonstrated themselves historically as being able to act not only as mobile and informed economic actors but also as deploying sophisticated strategies in the political sphere. Far from being the perpetual puppets of foreign actors and the 'Great Game', many Afghans consequently deployed and developed varying forms of agency, skill, and strategy, and, as an emerging body of scholarship demonstrates, they did so across the domains of political and economic life. By the end of the nineteenth century, Afghan merchants could be found dealing in guns in Bahrain (Crews 2014) and fruit in the great trade fairs of Nizhny Novgorod (Hopkins 2009). People from the territories that currently make-up Afghanistan did not inhabit closed and insular 'bio-moral communities' (cf. Marsden 2005): they were active participants in what Hopkins and Bayly have referred to as 'historic globalisation' (Hopkins and Bayly 2002). Recognition of the ability of Afghans to play an active part in such historic forms of globalisation has led much recent scholarship to question the concept of 'the Great Game' for understanding Afghanistan's history in the nineteenth century. As Benjamin Hopkins (2009) argues, the Great Game model fails to account for the forms of agency, skill, and strategy that people from the territories that today make up Afghanistan deployed in the context of colonial expansion.

Such reassessments of Afghanistan's relationships to the wider world are now also informing the way in which Afghans represents the country to the world today. Afghanistan is increasingly depicted by both its own political leadership as well as 'the international community' as being uniquely positioned to act as a trading hub between the world's Chinese workshop and its Eurasian markets. This model of Afghanistan relationship to the world,

referred to by the US government as ‘the New Silk Road Initiative’ has recently been given further definition by Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan’s President. In a speech at the Tsinghua University in Beijing, President Ghani depicted Afghanistan as a unique ‘hub of connectivity’.<sup>3</sup>

These developments in the fields of history and Afghan national politics overlap in important ways with the thinking and identities of Afghan transnational traders. During the course of a trip to the historic city of Kashgar in China’s Xinjiang Province, I met Barai, an Afghan in his mid-forties who is originally from northern Afghanistan but now resident in Ukraine. Barai studied history in Odessa during the early 1990s, and is married to a Ukrainian Sinologist. He told me that he was visiting Kashgar as part of a personal research project that he had developed in order to better understand the influence of Persianate culture and language on Chinese culture and society. Barai distances himself from the traders who make-up the majority of Afghans living in Ukraine, saying that he does not engage in the ‘dirty work’ of the bazaar. Yet he is close friends with many Afghan traders, and is often invited to speak to them about his research at events organized by Afghan community organisations. The traders’ collective identities therefore are informed by the activities of intellectuals interested in the historic role played by Afghans in connecting different parts of Asia to one another.

The traders also take pride in depicting themselves as being sophisticated and savvy individuals who can navigate myriad and complex forms of international relations, boundaries, and divisions. As is the case with diplomats, the traders’ mobility and their internationally oriented subjectivities are connected to their work, career trajectories, material lives, and intellectual interests: the skills of diplomacy ideally allow them to negotiate between multiple positions, and their ability to do so is also a source of collective self-identification. At the same time, such

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<sup>3</sup> Ashraf Ghani, Transcript of a Lecture by President Ashraf Ghani at Tsinghua University, Beijing, October 29th, 2014 <http://president.gov.af/en/news/transcript-of-lecture-by-president-ashraf-ghani-at-xinhua-university-beijing>, accessed on 11th November 2014.

skills also reflect the political instability of Afghanistan: individuals and communities have consistently been required to navigate a fluid political situation within the country.

The traders belong to far-flung transnational networks that are involved in the transport and sale of commodities (ranging from fruit and food products to precious stones and herbal medicines, and, in Russia and Ukraine especially Chinese-made low-grade goods) across a range of context in Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine, and Western Europe (Marsden 2016). These dynamic Afghan trading networks are helpfully analyzed in terms of recent scholarship on trans-regional circulations and societies and the ‘alternative geographies’ that contest conventional ways of thinking about culture areas, as well as nation-states, these produce (Marsden 2016; c.f. Amrith 2013; Freitag and von Oeppen 2010; Ho 2006). Work on such trans-regional circulations has shown how scholarship which treated regions as fixed geographical categories led apparently intermediary locales (such as Afghanistan) to be reduced to the status of marginal ‘borderlands’ (Green 2014). Recognition of the dynamic nature of geography, however, has led to more studies that analyse trans-regional contexts such as Afghanistan and its connected locales as acting as ‘corridors of connectivity’. Frontier people have historically and in the present-day forged links between contexts that conventional geographical understandings assume to be historically distinct or separate (Christelow 2012; Marsden and Hopkins 2012; Van Schendel 2002).

The traders do not form a homogeneous ‘social group’, but are differentiated according to markers of status, wealth, and position in trading hierarchies. The traders thus distinguish between very wealthy ‘principle merchants’ (*tojirho-i kalon*) (who travel widely in order to arrange for imports and to find new business opportunities), sellers or *furishondah* (who often work in the retail outlets that are owned by principal merchants), and labourers or *korgar* (whose job it is to move goods between warehouses and retail outlets, as well as between trading offices and shops). Such forms of difference and hierarchy also intersect with, yet are

never simply defined by, the traders' 'ethnic' and linguistic identities. Traders identify with a wide range of ethnicities, including Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtun; yet most if not all traders are business partners (*sharik*) with men who identify with other communities, and such partnerships are important not only to their business activities but also the rich and intense social lives that many of the traders also aspire to lead (Marsden 2011).

The past ideological and political affiliations of the traders reflect Afghanistan's modern political history and are also complex and diverse. The life histories of Afghan merchants in the former Soviet Union often stretch back to the 1970s and 80s, when thousands of Afghans travelled there as a result of higher education state bursaries. These men worked in Afghanistan during the eighties but returned to the territories of the former Soviet Union following the defeat of Dr Najibullah's pro-Soviet government in 1992. Some of the Afghan men working in the former Soviet Union today first travelled to the region as 7 to 13 year olds having been selected to attend Soviet boarding schools (*internat*). In the mid-1990s such traders were joined by men who had been aligned to one of Afghanistan various mujahidin factions, and who left their country during the period of the Taliban government to search for work in Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia. Most recently, young men who acted as translators and soldiers for the international forces active in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 have travelled to countries in the former Soviet Union with the hope of being relocated under refugee resettlement programmes to Europe and America.<sup>4</sup>

Being diplomatic for the traders is not merely important in terms of their ability to interact and work with people from the contexts outside of Afghanistan in which they reside – it is also crucial to their ability to forge viable social and commercial relations with one another. Indeed, the traders openly reflect on their need to build relationships with people they had once fought,

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<sup>4</sup> Afghan traders often also bring their Afghan wives and families to the former Soviet Union, see Marsden and Ibanez Tirado 2015.

and they do so in a manner that reflects what Kwon (2010) refers to as the ‘decomposition of the Cold War’. Attaullah, whom I introduced earlier in this article, for example, told me how he had offered his services to the mujahidin government, even after he had studied in the Soviet Union, become a committed communist, and worked for the pro-Soviet state. Today, Attaullah, uses these same diplomatic skills to negotiate his social relationships with Afghans working in Odessa’s 7km market, many of whom are supporters of the Islamist factions that he continues to distance himself from.

### **Trade and Diplomacy**

Given the frequency of their movement across national boundaries and their interactions with the state officials who police these, many of the traders and merchants with whom I work have a strong understanding of themselves as being a particularly international type of person—they often refer to themselves as being not only ‘international traders’ (*tojiron-i baynalmilli*) but also diplomats (*diplomat*). Traders therefore directly identify themselves as diplomats and refer to the skills of trade as being diplomatic. One of the ways in which this type of diplomatic selfhood is enacted, as the example of Attaullah demonstrated, is through clothing and bodily comportment (compare Ibanez Tirado’s article this volume). Besides developing particular modes of diplomatic bodily comportment – such as dressing in ways that reflect the circumstances in which they live, and in a manner that also attests to their civility and modernity - there are other objects that the traders associate with diplomacy, and consider an important part of their material worlds: these include the type of lockable leather bag they refer to as ‘the diplomat’.<sup>5</sup>

During their daily conversations the traders often advise one another to be diplomatic – doing so, it is said, will insure a man’s ability to successfully profit from the arbitrages that exist

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<sup>5</sup> The importance of ‘the diplomat’ to the traders’ material worlds recalls the diplomatic parcel.

between the states of affairs in different places. By being diplomatic traders refer in particular to the capacity of being flexible in the ways in which they present themselves to others, their ability to speak and converse in multiple languages, and to their capacity to live across different cultural settings. In terms of linguistic competence, many of the traders are able, in addition to Farsi and Pashto, to speak Russian and Ukrainian, and sometimes also Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese depending on the contexts in which they have lived and worked in China), English, and Turkish.<sup>6</sup> They also often argue that Afghans are naturally gifted in terms of their ability to learn languages. An important aspect of the ease with which Afghans learn languages, moreover, is their ability to enter into intimate and romantic ‘friendship’ (*dusti*) relationships with women, which is said to make language acquisition speedy. More generally, the ability to move is said to depend on a person’s deep familiarity with a diverse range of settings –multi-local familiarity is a further important aspect of being diplomatic in the traders’ understandings. Such multi-local familiarity is partly held by the traders to arise from a person’s connections to vast and geographically dispersed networks of Afghans: having ‘friends’, ‘partners’, and ‘cousins’ ‘everywhere’ makes it possible for traders to move widely, inexpensively, and safely. In addition, being ‘light footed’ and thus able to move from context-to-context in response to changes in circumstances is said to be a God-gifted (*khudadod*) talent that is possessed by some but not all traders.

At the same time, the capacity to move and the forms of familiarity with different contexts on which this rests is also held by the traders as resulting from their being able to establish relationships with people in the settings in which they live. As Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado have documented (2015) such forms of flexibility are especially clearly demonstrated in the marital unions that traders form with women in the host communities within which they operate. In a similar manner to the way in which the marriages that Yemeni scholar-traders

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<sup>6</sup> On the traders’ activities in China, see Marsden 2015b.

entered into with women across the vast Indian ocean realm helped to root the community in particular contexts, (e.g. Ho 2002), such unions moor mobile Afghan traders in a variety of trading nodes and thereby ensure that their distribution across space endures through time (cf. Aslanian 2011). For this type of marriage to endure, however, traders are required to deal appropriately with many sensitive issues, ranging, for example, from those that result from residing for reasons of economy and security in the house of their in-laws, to others relating to the upbringing of their children in culturally ‘mixed’ families. Some traders do justify having married a local woman rather than a spouse chosen by their parents on the grounds that they successfully welcomed her into the fold of Islam. Many, however, claim that they alter the behavior and thinking of the wives in far more diplomatic ways than simply ‘inviting’ them to Islam. Faridun, a young man in his mid-thirties who sells bags in Odessa, told me for example that whether or not he converted his Ukrainian wife to Islam or not was beside the point: ‘it is what is in her heart that matters’, he said, ‘ever since she has been with me I have been giving her an upbringing (*tarbyash mikunam*) which will ensure that she will act and behave in a civilized and trustworthy way’. It is helpful to think of Faridun’s mode of relating to his Ukrainian wife in terms of everyday diplomacy, rather than, for example, reflecting his cosmopolitanism: he emphasizes holding an attachment to particular ways of acting and behaving in the context of a complex series of cross-cultural interactions, rather than a simply openness to the others’ ways of living.

The length to which the traders go to present themselves as diplomats is also visible in the organisation of the spaces in which they carry out their everyday lives, most especially the trading offices and retail shops in which they spend a great deal of each day. Such offices tend to be located within the large market complexes within which the traders work, and are exclusively the terrain of wholesale (*humda*) rather than retail (*parchun*) business operations. In these spaces, traders depict themselves not merely as being traders of Afghan background



but also as official representatives of Afghanistan. It is usual for example to find the traders' offices equipped with large desks flanked by leather sofas and chairs. It is inevitable that, in addition to framed verses of the Qur'an, on the desks the flags both of Afghanistan and of the country in which the trading office is based are prominently displayed. In the Russian Federation, the flags of Afghanistan and Russia are often accompanied by a photograph of President Vladimir Putin. Such offices, similar to the waiting halls of consulates or embassies, are also embellished with large maps of Afghanistan painted on the wall, and photographs of traditional Afghan scenes, such as old-fashioned tea houses, the great shrine of Ali in Mazar or a game of Afghan buzkashi being played in Kunduz. While the networks the traders form are transregional and transnational, the traders self-understandings are deeply invested in Afghan nationalism. This combination of both being internationally-oriented actors and also committed to the politics of Afghan nationalism underscores the extent to which a 'core feature' of Afghan nationalism is the commitment that the country will always have an 'immense impact of the world' and the fortune of humanity (Crews 2015: 311).

The image of the diplomat signals dimensions, however, of the identities and self-understandings of the traders that encompass both the positive and more painful elements of their everyday lives and modes of earning a living. On the one hand, the act of describing themselves as diplomats reflects what the traders often say is their 'choice' (*tasmim*) to avoid violence in a world they see as being characterised by a lack of trust. Instead, they say, they use other skills to mediate, negotiate, and shape the complex contexts in which they live, while all the while holding on to a particular position. Such skills include the use of particular modes of gift-giving practice to establish relations with state officials, such as border guards, who might be hostile towards the traders, or see them as a simple source of revenue. On the other hand, diplomacy also demonstrates their recognition of the moral ambiguities of their work: diplomats and merchants alike are often the first to be accused of treacherous behaviour at

times of uncertainty, and the dangers of being called a 'spy' or 'traitor' by either Afghans or officials in the territories in which they live and work is an important feature of their universes.

In certain respects, indeed, diplomats and transnational Afghan traders do inhabit comparable moral universes that require them to address and contend with similar ethical ambiguities and dilemmas. As with formally employed diplomatic personnel, Afghan traders live spatially suspended lives. Many have been moving between Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine and various countries in Western Europe since 1991. Even those who married women in the countries in which they have established their business, and having done so expected to settle in the country in which they had married, have continued to lead highly mobile lives. Some took their families with them to Canada, Europe, and USA yet then returned to Central Asia to work; others were not granted visas to live in the home country of their wives or, equally often, were deported from these countries as a result of being unable to pay the taxes required of foreign residents. On the one hand, the traders' frequent experiences of both being deported and also denied visas to visit the countries in which they have family and business interests distinguishes them from official diplomats who are more easily able to embark on international travel. On the other hand, however, as with official diplomats, these men are skilled and internationally oriented actors yet they are also suspended in terms of their work and family relations, and they often complain that such forms of suspension place significant limits on their capacity to act autonomously—a key value around which their collective lives and social identities are forged. Furthermore, while diplomats are able to travel widely, they are only able to move within highly structured confines, and restrictions on mobility is a recurrent aspect of the experiences of official diplomats in many settings in the world. At the broadest level, diplomats and traders are both expected to act independently, with sophistication and in a manner as mobile as possible, yet to also loyally

represent the interests of either the polities or fixed merchant they serve. The importance of loyalty to the traders' activities reveals the extent to which the study of everyday diplomacy must embrace not merely the ways in which individuals and groups manage intercultural relations, but also how they fashion and sustain durable ties of commitment to one another.

### **Diplomatic Missions in the Contemporary Era**

It is important to emphasise that the manners in which many of the traders associate themselves with the figure of the diplomat is a reflection of their past lives and professional roles, rather than just being an aspect of their imaginaries. Many became 'traders' during the 1980s when they worked for the pro-Soviet Afghan state as officials in the security apparatus or ministry of foreign affairs – they frequently studied abroad, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union, and also traveled on official international visits during this period of their lives. In Khujand in northern Tajikistan in 2015 for example I encountered one trader from the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif who currently deals in Iranian-made soap and cleaning products. He told me and other people sitting in his retail outlet stories about his visits to Cuba and many other socialist countries as a young official in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1980s. At the same time, men who were part of the pro-Soviet government in roles that were not directly related to the official conduct of international diplomacy, often became directly implicated both in the conflict between the state and the opposition mujahidin groups, as well as in attempts to resolve this during the final years of the conflict. As in many other settings of the 'global cold war', furthermore, families in Afghanistan were themselves frequently divided along bi-polar lines, and this required individuals to bridge such relationships in careful and nuanced ways (Monsutti 2008; cf Kwon 2009).

With the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime, many such individuals left the country, only after having initially sought to be employed by the incoming mujahidin government until they eventually found that the differences in ‘attitude’ between themselves and the new holders of power were too extensive to deal with. The act of leaving Afghanistan and trading in government employment (*wazifa*) for the life of a merchant did not, however, simply bring the official diplomatic activities of these people to a conclusion. Rather, their skills and capacities continue to be called upon by a variety of institutions and state organs. In Odessa in 2013, for example, I was told by Afghan traders that a particularly influential and wealthy Afghan trader was asked by the government of Ukraine to act on its behalf to secure the release of a Ukrainian pilot who had been kidnapped in Afghanistan after his plane had crashed in an area controlled by the Taliban. The trader was asked to perform this role as he had acted as the president of the ‘Afghan committee’ in Odessa: the committee represents the interests of Afghan traders in the city, claims responsibility for the welfare of Afghans, and also adjudicates in the case of their being conflicts between the traders. This man was said to have been especially effective in this role: Afghans in Odessa remarked to me that should an Afghan fall foul of the law or be confronted by a policeman the president of the committee would arrive within minutes to ‘solve his country man’s problems’. As the purported invitation of Ukraine’s government suggests, he was not simply regarded as being able to play the role of a consular official but also to have the skills required of an international diplomat. It was rumoured by Afghans in Odessa, however that on having met with Taliban officials in order to negotiate the release of the pilot, the trader was then arrested by Hamid Karzai’s government, and accused of having been complicit with the Taliban before being subsequently jailed. Nation-states recognize that transnational trading communities are endowed with diplomatic skills, as well as the relationships and connections critical to the conduct of many types of diplomatic activity. As a result, they are sometimes called upon to put these to service in the interests of the nation-

states in which they live. At the same time, being called upon to act as diplomatic mediators in such contexts also brings with it the possibility of significant consequences both for individual traders, and, as is now explored, the communities and networks to which they belong.

The above examples attest to the diplomatic skills that traders proudly claim to possess and to the ways in which officials in the country's in which they live recognise and also seek to benefit from these. What also emerges however, is the thin line between being a diplomat and being a traitor: it is exactly this issue that is overlooked in simplistic notions of 'cultural diplomacy' that treat members of diasporic communities as forming bridges between different nation-states because of their knowledge of two or more 'cultures'. By analyzing the activities of Afghan traders using the analytical device of 'the diplomat', I am not merely bringing attention to their ability to form relationships or 'bridges' across cultures but also to the forms of work they invest in 'the blurring but not the dissolution of boundaries' (Bryant 2016: 27). This is also something to which Bruno Latour has brought attention. Latour (2007) notes that diplomats trouble the boundary between 'morality' and 'pragmatism': a diplomat's skill in the use of words, capacity to engage in the redefinition of argument, and ability to refine the requirements held by parties immersed in disputes with one another, are what makes them 'clever', yet these same qualities also risk their being rendered into scapegoats as 'unscrupulous traitors'. The anxieties caused by the inherent untrustworthiness of the figure of the diplomat is amplified in the case of a trading network such as the Afghans described in this article in comparison to the activities of official diplomats. The absence of state sanction in delimiting and legitimizing the diplomatic activities of trading networks of traders helps to explain hostility to such groups in a wider variety of settings, ranging from anti-Semitism in Central Europe, to popular hostility towards Jains and other Baniyas in India, and the Chinese of South East Asia.

In the case of the 'President' (*rais*) of Odessa's Afghan community I did not hear of this man's public decision to enter a diplomatic role as having had negative consequences for other traders

in the city.<sup>7</sup> Having close ties to the nation-state and its officials is important in this as in other trading networks because it can secure and protect collective economic and social interests. Nevertheless, participation in public life can also be dangerous and have long-lasting consequences, not just for individual traders but the activities of multiple individuals making up the network more generally. For example, a wealthy Afghan trader in Uzbekistan was married to one of the current President's daughters. Eventually, the couple's marriage resulted in a divorce and unsurprisingly the trader lost all of his assets in the country, including the franchise of a Coca Cola factory that he had established there. From the point of view of many Afghans with experience of trading in Uzbekistan however what was important about this series of events was that it resulted in the Uzbek state making it harder for Afghan traders to work in Uzbekistan: a country that had hitherto been deemed an excellent place to work, invest, and trade, very quickly became largely out of bounds for Afghan traders after the regime erected significant barriers to their commercial activities.

Another example of an Afghan judged by networks of traders to have overstepped the boundary between commercial and political activity is to be found in Ukraine. One of the Maidan protest's more prominent leaders is Mustafa Nayyem whose father works in a wholesale market (the Troeshchina market) in Kiev. While some Afghan traders in Ukraine cite this young man's activities as evidence of Afghan community becoming an established feature of Ukrainian society, most seem more dubious about his activities. I have been told that Afghan traders fear that Nayyem's activities will lead to unwanted attention to the presence of Afghans in Ukraine or that Nayyem will himself reveal secrets about the community's trading activities and the types of political relationships on which they are based. There is thin line between taking an active role in political life and keeping a low profile with the interests of Afghan traders in

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<sup>7</sup> In settings in which the leadership role predominantly concerns the management of trading disputes and issues, the historic Persian term to refer to a head trader, *kalontar*, is frequently used.

mind. A truly diplomatic trader successful meets his political ambitions without also harming the interests of Afghan commercial activities, especially those in the country in which he is based.

### **Alternative Sites of Diplomacy**

I now explore how trading networks such as this also seek to create, establish and authorise centres of activity that overlap both with the roles of diplomats and of consular officials. By establishing recognized and authorized centres of diplomatic activity, the traders also challenge the degree to which the organs of the nation-state are the institutions solely authorised to carry out diplomatic functions.

It is common to hear from Afghan traders living in a wide range of settings that they are ‘left abandoned’ (*besohib*) by the Afghan state. Being abandoned by the state is said to disadvantage Afghan traders in relation to merchants from other countries. For example, merchants from Iran, who are also often active in the settings in which Afghans have established business, are said to be able to rely upon diplomatic personnel and institutions for the provision of security in a manner in which Afghans are not. There has long been a dynamic relationship between the nation state considering the role of its overseas consuls as being principally to protect the interests of its overseas merchants or, alternatively, as regulating the behaviour and comportment of such groups so as to ensure they do not bring the nation-state into disrepute (McKeown 2008). Importantly, however, in the state of abandonment in which Afghans say they have been left, the traders take active steps to establish alternative centres of diplomacy.

Moscow, for instance, is home to about 10,000 Afghans –a significant proportion of these are involved in businesses activities relating to the sale (wholesale and retail) of commodities made in China. A key node for these trading activities is the ‘Homeland Trading Centre’ at the Sevastopol Hotel Complex (built originally for the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980). The

Homeland Trading Centre is home to about 4000 Afghan traders and is overseen by a committee of management led by a former official in Afghanistan's secret security services. Many of the traders in the centre belong to Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities (especially those based in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and in the eastern region of Paktia) that have been of historic importance in the provision of credit to the country's Muslim merchants (Dale 1994; Markovits 2000). The ongoing importance of such communities to the activities of Muslim traders from Afghanistan in Moscow today, points to continuities in commercial relations. The trading centre was previously also home to a school that provided classes to children from Afghanistan in Farsi and Pashto. In addition to the traders who own shops, offices, and warehouses in the complex, there are also many recent migrants from Afghanistan who work as labourers, carrying commodities from the warehouses to the trading offices, as well as transporting the commodities to markets across the city. Currently, the Homeland Trading Centre also provides a TV service to the traders' offices (relaying films in Dari and Pashto), and produces a daily newspaper. Traders often remark that the Trading Centre is an island of relative security for Afghans in a city in which hostility to foreigners in general and 'blackheads' (*kala siyah*) in particular is intense and sometimes violent. The traders often say that high politics has also played a major role in the initial establishment and future survival of the hotel/trading complex – traders say that the hotel is a gift from President Putin to the Afghans either to thank them for their loyalty to Russia or in anticipation of future loyalty. Life in Russia is frequently said to have become so problematic for Afghans that many have left the country, moving their trading activities to Ukraine or China for example, or seeking refugee status in European countries, especially Sweden and Finland. During a visit to Russia in 2015, traders remarked that the decline in the value of the ruble, combined with the effect of EU sanctions on the Russian economy, had meant that many Afghan migrants who had previously worked as labourers at the Sevastopol Hotel had left Russia for Europe. As a result, I was told,



merchants in the Homeland Trading Centre were finding it increasingly difficult to find the affordable and reliable labour upon which their business depended.

Today the hotel also stands at the heart of disputes between Afghan traders and the country's Embassy in the Russian Federation. A new commercial secretary was sent in 2014 from Afghanistan to the Embassy in Moscow, but the ambassador (allied to the previous President, Hamid Karzai) was apparently opposed to the man's appointment, and therefore created obstacles to him formally assuming his position. In response, traders told me that the Afghan trade association offered to provide a room either within or outside the Sevastopol hotel complex for the appointed commercial secretary. Many of the traders themselves also say that they face legal or economic difficulties they seek advice and support from the President of the Afghan community in Moscow (who is based in the Sevastopol Hotel), rather than visiting the Embassy of Afghanistan. In both Ukraine and Russia, then, Afghan organisations, associations, and individuals seek to earn reputations for offering the type of assistance to their country people that in other contexts it might be expected to be delivered by official consular officials. Given the preference of many Afghans in Moscow to 'solve their problems' in the hotel rather than the Embassy, they argue, it is fitting that the personnel of Afghanistan's Embassy should work under the 'roof' of the Afghan community as opposed to that of the country's corrupt and ineffective state machinery. Influential traders, then, come to directly assume diplomatic roles by speaking for 'Afghans' and also representing the country's people and interests abroad. It is noteworthy that 'the site' (Henig this volume; Neumann 2012) for these competing forms of diplomacy is a hotel built by the Soviet state to house visitors to the city attending the Olympic Games, pointing towards the ways in which the histories of the spaces in which the traders work themselves also inform the notions of diplomacy that inform their lives and self-understandings.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to bring attention to the status of diplomacy as both an analytical device and a local notion worthy of ethnographic attention. It illustrated both aspects of 'the anthropology of diplomacy' through a consideration of the diplomatic skills and capacities of Afghan traders whom collectively form long-distance trade networks, especially those active in Ukraine and Russia. The traders' illustrate the type of sites and practices upon which anthropologists interested in the study of diplomacy from settings outside of those of the formal organs of the state or organized institutional activity might focus. The case of Afghan traders is perhaps especially helpful through which to think about everyday modes of diplomacy because of the degree to which many of the traders identify themselves and their modes of behaving as 'being diplomatic'. At an analytical level a comparison of the worlds of official diplomats and Afghan traders also reveals significant parallels, suggesting that while the professionalization of 'the diplomat' as a specific type of political personnel whose activities are attached to the authority of the nation-state is a critical feature of the modern era, there is also a need to be attendant to the ways in which diplomatic skills and capacities are often deeply embedded in particular types of community, networks, and contexts. As the article also demonstrated, actors from such backgrounds have both been recruited by nation-states on the basis of their diplomatic skills and have also played a critical role in mediating, forging, and maintaining various forms of relationships of exchange in sites and domains other than those monopolized by the nation-state.

On a more general level, it is striking that while anthropologists have forged inter-disciplinary if 'awkward' conversations with historians (Cohn 1990), feminists (Strathern 1987), and theologians (Robbins 2006) in recent years, there have been far fewer attempts to fashion a relationship with diplomats or diplomatic studies. The introduction to this Special Issue has suggested that a significant reason for these lacunae lie in the sensitivities surrounding anthropology's role in colonialism and later the Cold War. A potential way of overcoming this

impasse lies, I have suggested in this article, in the growing interactions between scholars of anthropology and global history. This field of scholarship has demonstrated the insights that both disciplines seek to gain from considerations of the importance of processes of exchange to the fashioning of cross-cultural relations across and between individuals, societies, and polities of varying scales. Recognition of the critical diplomatic roles played by actors, notably merchants but also religious personnel (see Henig this volume), involved in these processes is currently stimulating growing recognition of the alternatives sites of diplomacy that played an active and dynamic role in mediating political relations between polities ranging from local fiefdoms to transregional empires. In the current context of globalizing flows that nation-states seek to both encourage but also regulate and monitor there is an urgent need to better understand the ongoing significance of such sites and the everyday modes of diplomacy that are critical to them.

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